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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses ethnography, ethnographic methodology, and how an ethnographic perspective can influence pedagogical decisions related to the teaching and evaluating of writing. A review of the research on writing as it relates to the individual writer's culture is presented and recommendations are made regarding the development of writing programs based on ethnographic considerations. (AEA)

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Ethnography and the Teaching of Composition

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"Ethnography" keeps cropping up in unexpected places. Until recently ethnography was associated exclusively with anthropology. Nowadays it is not surprising to come across the term in journals dealing with a variety of subjects, especially education. Nevertheless, the speaker who mentions ethnography is often greeted by quizzical looks from his audience. I believe it is timely to discuss the nature of ethnography and demonstrate how an ethnographic perspective can influence pedagogical decisions related to the teaching of writing.

It is best to begin discussing these questions by describing some recent research in the teaching of composition which was heavily influenced by ethnographic considerations. Mina Shaughnessy, although she did not call her research ethnography, asked ethnographic questions and, in a limited way, applied ethnographic methodology to answer them. As many of us know, she looked at the writing of her students, not with the purpose of judging that writing, but in an effort to understand the factors underlying their characteristic use of language. She found identifiable semantic, syntactic and rhetorical patterns in their writing, and then, on the basis of what she knew about the socio-linguistic backgrounds of her students, she hypothesized that their

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"errors" were not the result of "poor thinking" or lack of intelligence, but a consequence of their habitual way of using language in their community. Her conclusions were very much in agreement with observations made by anthropologists and educators, such as John Gumperz and John Szwed, who have studied the difficult transition to literacy of children from minority cultures. (Szwed, 1977) (Gumperz, 1977).

Shaugnessy argued that aca[illegible] discourse was the type of writing that her students most needed to know. She analyzed the structure and function of academic discourse as a necessary first step before suggesting a methodology for bridging the gap between the writing of her students and the conventions of academic discourse, always keeping in mind an understanding of her students' views regarding the use of language as well as their ability to write. Throughout her writings she reminds us that the ability to improve instruction will be limited unless we know more precisely than we do now how writing differs from other language skills, already acquired by the student as a speaker and reader, and "how these skills support or interfere with attempts to write." (Shaughnessy, 1976). Also, she repeatedly emphasizes that her students were unfamiliar with the function of academic writing because they had no previous social need to use language in this way.

Shaughnessy's search for better ways to teach and evaluate writing by looking at the writing of her students against the background of the relationship between the language customs and behavior of their

community and the school's language demands incorporates a major assumption underlying ethnography, namely, the interdependent nature of culture. Shirley Heath, an enthnographer at the University of Pennsylvania, says that ethnography holds out holism as a guiding concept, regardless of the subject under study. (Heath, April 1978) One asks, how does the subject interact with the culture, how is it influenced by the culture, what impact does it have on the culture? The ethnographer attempts to answer these questions by staying as close as possible to real cases and individual examples, and makes an effort to examine each case in great depth. He uses multiple data collection strategies such as surveys, analysis of artifacts and, most important, a prolonged personal interaction with his subjects. He avoids using a predetermined system of categories, preferring to organize his data on the basis of the conceptual framework of his subject. Shaughnessy, for example, did not have preconceived categories in mind when she began to analyze the errors in her students' writing. She developed those categories on the basis of reading numerous papers.

Ethnography, applied to education, encourages us to look at the role of the educator in what Dell Hymes calls the "actual communities of persons." (Hymes, 1974). The ethnographer asks, as Shaughnessy did, what skills does the society (in the larger or smaller context) value? What skills does the student use? What skills do they value? How do their experiences in a given skill area affect the learning process? More specifically, when we ask these questions in relation to writing,

we want to know:

1. What function does writing perform in various sectors of the society?
2. What are the characteristics of the different kinds of writing valued by our society?
3. What is the function of writing in our students' communities?
4. What role do they believe writing will play in their future lives?
5. What are the characteristics of our students' writing?

A great deal of research is needed before we can answer these questions. Szwed says "we know very little about the range of uses to which writing is put, or, rather, we know only just enough to put assumptions in doubt." (Szwed, 1978). With all of the concern and activity related to the acquisition of writing skills one would expect a general consensus regarding the importance of writing, supported by ample evidence. This is by no means the case. On the contrary, the unimportance of writing is often added to the list of possible causes for the decline in writing skills. In a new book on linguistic concepts the author says "in modern times the telephone, telivision and radio have become more effective than writing for rapid transmission of communication over great distances." (Pearson, 1977) Ross Winterowd says in the introduction to one of his textbooks, "Frankly, it is hard for me to argue that learning to write well is useful in the narrow sense, to argue that you won't be able to get along in life without being able to accomplish the sorts of writing this book teaches." (Winterowd,1975).

Janet Emig and Lee Odell, among others, are going out into various sectors of society to find out how much people are writing and the kinds of writing they are doing. In a talk he gave at Beaver College (1978) Dr. Odell described writing events he had isolated in industrial settings. As a result of the "writing across the curriculum" trend teachers of composition are attempting to describe the various kinds of academic writing in great detail, and in addition they are trying to assess the amount of writing required in various courses.

In addition to defining the writing needs of the communities our students will enter, there is research being directed toward understanding the students' own concept of the function of writing and how they arrived at those concepts. Dixie Goswani (U. of Tenn.) and Shirley Heath are pursuing this type of research using a "pure" ethnographic approach. They are gathering data from the students, from members of the students' communities, as well as looking at writing artifacts in those communities. Anthropologists and linguists interested in the problem of literacy (Szwed, Scribner, Phillips) are performing similar studies. By using a quasi-ethnographic paradigm teachers of composition are making an effort to assess their students' attitudes towards the function of writing. For example, at Drexel University where I teach composition we have administered a questionnaire to all of our freshman in which we ask them about their concept of the role that writing plays at various stages in their lives.

Furthermore, a great deal of research in being carried out in an effort to answer some of the questions Shaughnessy poses regarding the relationship of our students' writing to their other language skills. Some of this research is directed towards explaining the relationship between speech and writing in general. Writing is being described as a dialect with its own rules, conventions, and syntactic patterns. (Newman and Horowitz, 1965) More specifically the impact of various minority dialects on learning to write is being examined. The Spring, 1975 issue of Basic Writing is devoted exclusively to this subject.

The research which I have described is informed by ethnographic considerations which should influence our decisions regarding what to teach and how to teach. It will help us to choose modes of discourse and methodologies appropriate for particular student populations. Textbook authors should not be making those decisions for us, nor should we choose writing tasks on the basis of some vague feelings we have about the importance of writing. Those traditional assumptions are being questioned. Sylvia Scribner suggests that we may be spending too much time on the academic model without questioning the applicability of this model to the future writing needs of our students. (Scribner, 1977) Shirley Heath's writing projects in rural North and South Carolina are good examples of the transfer of knowledge of how writing is used in the communities and work settings of different cultures to the classroom. She discovered that "for functions they valued" students who had previously resisted writing instruction

"learned to write in a range of styles for a variety of reader." (Heath, March, 1978).

Many of us will decide to concentrate on the academic model, basing our decision on our students immediate writing needs. However, regardless of the model we choose, we should be aware of having made a conscious choice and we should be able to defend that choice when our students ask us the question that Janet Emig says should start off every writing class, namely "why write?" (Emig, 1978)

Furthermore, if we teach writing with its social uses in mind we will focus on the traits of that writing most intimately related to its social function. For example, Shaughnessy suggests emphasizing the prototypic thought patterns underlying academic discourse because they are vital to the explanatory function of that type of discourse. In a sense we are trying to teach in relationship to writing what Hymes describes as the "knowledge a child internalizes about speaking beyond rules of grammar, and a dictionary while becoming a full fledged member of his speech community." (Hymes, 1968)

Having decided what to teach we are ready to choose modes of instruction and evaluation. If we make these choices in the light of what we know about the relationship between speech and writing we are squarely within the ethnographic tradition. It is true that our knowledge in this area is still fragmented. However, we can try to make methodological decisions sensitive to present theory and completed research on this subject. Gumperz, for example, suggests saturating children in writing rhythms as a method of teaching the dialect of writing by duplicating the way people learn to speak, that is by listening. (Gumperz/Gumperz,1977)

This brief discussion about the implications of ethnography for writing instruction is by no means comprehensive. For example, ethnographic methodology can contribute a great deal of information in an evaluation of the teaching of writing, a subject which deserves to be treated separately. What I have attempted to do is demonstrate that the ethnographic perspective has much to contribute to research in the teaching of composition. Shaughnessy said that "the difficulties of so-called remedial students are the difficulties all writers writ large." (Shaughnessy, 1978) I agree, and would therefore recommend that teaching informed by ethnographic considerations not be limited to the classrooms of our basic writing students.

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